

## Philosophy in Review



# Tzachi Zamir, "Just Literature: Philosophical Criticism and Justice."

Rafe McGregor

Volume 40, Number 4, November 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074039ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074039ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McGregor, R. (2020). Review of [Tzachi Zamir, "Just Literature: Philosophical Criticism and Justice."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(4), 179–181.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074039ar>

Copyright © Rafe McGregor, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Tzachi Zamir.** *Just Literature: Philosophical Criticism and Justice.* Routledge 2020. 110 pp. \$59.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138091689).

*Just Literature: Philosophical Criticism and Justice* is Tzachi Zamir's fifth book, continuing the exploration of the relationship between philosophy and literature begun in *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton University Press 2006) and developed in *Ascent: Philosophy and Paradise Lost* (Oxford University Press 2017). Aside from his complex and innovative work in this field, he is best-known for establishing the first systematic philosophical aesthetics of the art form of acting in *Acts: Theater, Philosophy, and the Performing Self* (2014). *Just Literature* is part of Routledge's New Literary Theory series, published in the Routledge Focus format. Routledge Focus, like Palgrave Pivot and Emerald Points, is a fairly recent development in academic publishing, featuring short monographs whose publication is expedited in order to provide commentary on or analysis of current events or topical issues. I am not sure about the value of the expedition for academic work, but I am in favour of the format, which is about half the length of a standard monograph and encourages clear, concise, and focused writing.

Zamir introduces his unique approach to the overlap of literary studies and philosophy as a response to the mutual dependence of the aesthetic and epistemic values of literature, expressed in the following three claims: (1) exemplary literature enables insights by means of experiential pathways; (2) aesthetic value and epistemic or cognitive value are often interlinked; and (3) criticism becomes philosophical when it bridges the gap between emotion and insight. The purpose of *Just Literature* is twofold, to introduce philosophical criticism and to employ philosophical criticism to achieve a better understanding of the concept of justice. The monograph consists of an introduction, five chapters divided into two parts, a coda, and an appendix. The parts are divided by theory and practice, with the first sketching philosophical criticism in more detail than the introduction (chapter 1) and introducing justice as a concept (chapter 2). Part II applies this theory to practice, extrapolating the relationships between justice, on the one hand, and attachment (chapter 3), pity (chapter 4), and mercy (chapter 5) on the other. The coda presents a pithy and memorable conclusion by means of a personal anecdote, recalling the author's use of the same device in his second monograph, *Ethics and the Beast: A Speciesist Argument for Animal Liberation* (Princeton University Press 2008).

Zamir does not require the pressure of a reduced word count to write with clarity and concision, for which *Just Literature* provides a model, but he also succeeds in dealing with the three relationships of Part II at a satisfying level of detail in spite of the imposed brevity. Chapter 4, 'Pity and the moral role of sadness,' is paradigmatic in this regard and, more importantly, indicative of the potential political impact of literary criticism. The chapter constitutes an argument for pity as a particular moral virtue: 'Pity, I will claim, consists of the capacity to absorb another's suffering without leaping into agency. You pity when realizing that nothing can or ought to be done about the suffering you behold' (53). Zamir points out that pity is often conflated with compassion, in which the absorption of another's suffering is the cause of action to alleviate that suffering. (Though the distinction is set out in sufficient detail in the chapter, he provides a short appendix in which he distinguishes pity from all five accepted philosophical accounts of compassion.)

He then differentiates between passive and active pity. The former occurs when there is no motivation to action because of the agent either misjudging the magnitude of suffering or exhibiting *akrasia*. Active pity, in contrast, involves a deliberate commitment to inaction: 'You believe that you cannot help the other, or that you ought not to help the other, or that the other's pain should not lessen' (56). Zamir establishes active pity as a virtue through an interpretation of Dante Alighieri's

*Inferno*, the first part of his *Divina Commedia* (completed in 1320, but not published until 1472). His excavation of the superficial didacticism of the narrative poem exposes five principles of the relationship between sin and punishment in Dante, the combination of which provides a more complex conception of sin as its own punishment: ‘Infernal encounters are arguments, X-ray snapshots of erroneous ways of being’ (59). In Zamir’s philosophical criticism, literature provides experientially grounded insights and the experientially grounded insight of the *Inferno* is that pity is ‘a virtue allowing for a kind of sadness from which we recoil’ (54).

One might well ask, *so what?* This is very interesting for philosophers, who thrive on the minutiae of conceptual analysis, and literary theorists, for whom the significance of pity in the *Inferno* enriches interpretations of the poem. But what difference could this study in philosophical criticism possibly make outside of academia’s ivory towers? Zamir begins the chapter with a discussion of two responses to the 2017 Halamish stabbing attack, in which a Palestinian insurgent killed three Israelis. Israel’s far left chose to empathize exclusively with the insurgent and Israel’s far right exclusively with the victims. Zamir suggests that both these flawed positions are reached by the erroneous reduction of pity to compassion. Without a fully formed concept of pity, responses are narrowed to either compassion or indifference, neither of which is morally appropriate. The two extremists thus instantiate a mirror-image of moral impropriety: the far left demonstrates compassion for the suffering of the insurgent and indifference to the suffering of the victims; the far right demonstrates compassion for the suffering of the victims and indifference to the suffering of the insurgent. After making his literary case for the moral significance of pity, Zamir makes a bold but compelling claim about the relationship between conception and action, revealing that neither Hebrew nor Arabic has a direct equivalent for ‘pity.’ The suggestion is that this absence in language underpins an absence in conceptualization that has exerted an influence on the inability to reach a satisfactory solution to the political problem of which the Halamish attack is a symptom. I lack sufficient expertise in the Arab-Israeli conflict to be able to judge the extent to which an absence of pity provides a convincing explanation of seven decades of asymmetrical violence, but the identification of common ground between opposed extremisms is well worth pursuing. In *Narrative Justice* (Rowan & Littlefield 2018), I made a corresponding argument for the concept of deliverance, understood in terms of liberation and salvation, as underpinning the global violence perpetrated by both white supremacist and Muslim fundamentalist insurgents. Zamir’s argument deploys literature more innovatively than mine, but regardless of the precise approach I think the contribution of linguistic analyses to the reduction of political violence is at present underdeveloped.

Zamir achieves both of his aims in *Just Literature*, introducing philosophical criticism and using it to achieve a better understanding of justice. Employing his own criterion for the falsification of his method, I find the idea that an engaged reader could work her way through the monograph and ‘learn nothing new about justice’ implausible (2). I must admit, however, that the first time I worked through it myself I felt a sense of disappointment that was not allayed by even the poignant and punchy coda. The cause was too many ideas for whose elaboration my appetite had been whetted but not satisfied, from ‘existential amplification’ (13) to literature’s ability to ‘re-present a specific situation’ (22) to the implications of the ‘unevolved concept’ (66) for extremism mentioned above. The question on which I focused in my second reading was whether this disappointment was an inevitable consequence of the brevity of the Focus format or of an authorial failure in terms of structure. The answer is unequivocally the former. I have already shown that Zamir can reach an impressive depth of analysis over the course of a short chapter (sixteen pages for chapter 4) and my mistake was to bring the same expectations I brought to *Double Vision* and *Ascent* to *Just Literature*. The format of the last simply precludes the plenitude of the first two. To take the specific sources of my

disappointment as examples, Zamir deals with existential amplification and representing at length in *Acts* and *Ascent* respectively and there is thus no need to cover the same ground again. With this in mind, *Just Literature*'s success is actually threefold rather than twofold: in introducing philosophical criticism, in demonstrating the value of philosophical criticism, and in whetting the reader's appetite for the rest of the author's oeuvre.

**Rafe McGregor**, Edge Hill University